DAWN

OPINION

Unanswered murders

THE International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists arrives at a time when violence against journalists has grown deadlier and justice more elusive. According to the International Federation of Journalists, at least 99 journalists and media workers have been killed so far this year, mostly in Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan. The Committee to Protect Journalists notes that the persistent failure to prosecute perpetrators has emboldened those who target reporters, spreading fear and eroding the public's right to know. Unesco, meanwhile, warns that nine out of 10 journalist murders worldwide remain unsolved, revealing how deeply impunity has taken root. The stories behind these numbers are those of immense courage and loss: Palestinian-American reporter Shireen Abu Akleh, shot dead in 2022 while covering an Israeli raid; Mexico's Javier Valdez C rdenas, murdered for exposing drug-cartel links; Slovakia's J n Kuciak, killed for investigating corruption. Their families still wait for justice, while governments evade responsibility. CPJ observes that the pattern of impunity stretches from autocracies to democracies. This is proof that the failure to protect journalists is a global moral collapse, not a regional flaw.

This year's global theme — 'Chat GBV: Raising Awareness on AI-facilitated Gender-Based Violence against Women Journalists' — captures a newer, more insidious front. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence has grown exponentially, with deepfakes, doxxing and algorithm-driven harassment used to discredit women and deter them from public life. The anonymity of digital platforms, combined with the speed and scale of generative AI, has created a hostile environment where smear campaigns can spread worldwide within minutes and remain online indefinitely. Such abuse is not only psychological warfare but a deliberate attempt to push women out of journalism. When women journalists retreat from digital spaces, society loses voices essential to fair and diverse storytelling.

The picture is no less grim in Pakistan. Freedom Network's impunity report for 2025 recorded a 60pc rise in attacks and legal actions against journalists between November 2024 and September 2025, documenting 142 cases nationwide. Government authorities were responsible in seven out of 10 incidents, while Islamabad and Punjab each accounted for 28pc of violations. The Pakistan Press Foundation's 2025 review corroborates this pattern, listing over 137 cases of threats, arrests, and assaults during the same period — including 35 physical attacks, eight arrests, and 22 cases under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act. Both groups warn that such actions are eroding the fragile gains once promised by Pakistan's journalist-safety laws. Despite the early adoption of these laws, enforcement is weak and commissions largely dormant. Until the state shows the will to investigate attacks credibly, reform Peca, and confront the online persecution of women journalists, impunity will remain the unspoken law of the land.

Dangerous waters

THE confirmation by a Sydney-based think tank that India has, at least once, weaponised water since its unilateral suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty shows how a lifeline resource can be turned into a tool of coercive diplomacy at the expense of an entire people. The latest *Ecological Threat Report*, published by the Institute for Economics and Peace, notes that India cannot abruptly shut off or permanently divert the flows of the three western rivers — Indus, Jhelum and Chenab — allocated to Pakistan under the treaty it revoked in April following the Pahalgam terrorist attack. Yet, New Delhi's control over upstream run-of-the-river dams gives it the capacity to manipulate water flows, albeit within technical limits, in ways that could have serious consequences for Pakistan's agriculture and food security. The real danger lies in the timing and unpredictability of dam operations as is evident from India's unilateral 'reservoir flushing' on Chenab, carried out without prior notification to Pakistan earlier this summer. Its impact was dramatic: Chenab in Pakistan's Punjab ran dry for several days before being struck by sediment-laden torrents.

For more than six decades, the IWT stood as a rare pillar of stability in otherwise turbulent mutual ties. It survived wars and diplomatic breakdowns, providing a structured mechanism for dialogue and dispute resolution over water-sharing issues. India's unilateral decision to suspend the treaty, however, marks a dangerous departure as it not only heightens the risk of armed conflicts between the two nuclear-armed neighbours but also sets a troubling precedent for transboundary water-sharing arrangements. For a country whose lifeblood runs through the Indus basin, and where inter-provincial water sharing is already fraught, even minor disruptions in river flows can prove devastating. It is no surprise, then, that Pakistan has repeatedly warned that any attempt by India to cut off its water would be deemed an act of war. It is unfortunate that what was once a landmark framework for cooperative river-sharing now risks getting entangled in the broader geopolitical rivalries shaping South Asia, a region already burdened with climate stress and political volatility. The Indus has sustained many civilisations; its uninterrupted flow should remain a symbol of shared survival. Turning a common water resource into a weapon of war or an instrument of coercion will endanger not just Pakistan's future, but also region stability.

Quetta disconnected

ONCE again, the residents of Quetta were cut off from the world for their own 'security'. Mobile and internet services in the provincial capital remained suspended for all of Friday, after authorities in Islamabad said they had received intelligence warnings of possible militant activity, which necessitated a shutdown of vital communication services. The frequent information blackouts imposed on the city and, indeed, the wider province have always been presented as a necessary precaution; however, they seem to be becoming disturbingly routine. The question must be asked: how long should the residents of Quetta live in this perpetual state of uncertainty and insecurity? Each shutdown deepens the isolation of a region that has already been struggling with underdevelopment and neglect. The authorities seem to forget that for a major urban centre like Quetta, internet and telephone connectivity is not a luxury but a lifeline: banks, small businesses, media outlets and citizens all depend on it. In this, Quetta, or any other city, cannot be treated any differently than Lahore or Karachi.

Cutting the lines of communication means disrupting livelihoods, hampering emergency access and services, and reinforcing a sense of civic exclusion. For those inconvenienced by these measures, it is a reminder that the state's first reflex is to restrict their lives. To be clear, there is no question that the government must respond swiftly to credible threats. However, blanket information blackouts are blunt and counterproductive. Instead, the authorities would be better served by investing in targeted intelligence and addressing the root causes of the security crisis. A city as big as Quetta cannot continue to be treated as an 'exceptional case'. Unless some form of accountability is established, it is possible that information blackouts will continue to be used to curtail even basic civil freedoms under the guise of security. This is more likely to increase the feelings of alienation that feed Balochistan's security crisis than solving the problem.

BY MUHAMMAD AMIR RANA

Why the Taliban turned hostile

The Taliban have turned even more hostile towards Pakistan than previous Afghan regimes.

WHY have the Afghan Taliban, once viewed as Pakistan's strategic proxies, turned hostile towards the state that sheltered and supported them? This question is gaining traction in Pakistan's public discourse as tensions between the two sides deepen. Analysts are seeking explanations rooted in political and strategic realities, but the roots of this shift lie deeper in the Taliban's ideological self-conception and the tribal codes that shape their worldview.

Long before the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, some observers had predicted that the movement would swiftly discard the perception of its being Pakistan's creation once it achieved its objective in Afghanistan. That prediction has proved accurate. The Taliban's behaviour reflects not just political pragmatism but also an embedded sense of honour (*nang or ghairat*) within the framework of *Pashtunwali*, the traditional Pakhtun code of conduct that governs social and moral life.

In *Pashtunwali*, honour transcends mere pride or courage. It embodies integrity, loyalty, and the defence of autonomy. It demands that promises be kept and hospitality respected, yet it also obliges independence from external control. Loyalty, in this sense, is conditional, not permanent servitude. It must not compromise one's dignity or sovereignty. For the Taliban, accepting Pakistan's continued patronage after victory in Kabul would be seen as a violation of their honour, a sign of subordination incompatible with their self-image as victors and rulers.

Expecting loyalty in return for hospitality is common across many South Asian and Central Asian tribal and rural societies. Yet within the same social codes, prolonged hospitality is often seen as a burden and, in some contexts, even a curse. It exposes the inner character of both host and guest, creating emotional and material strains. The longer such relationships last, the greater the likelihood that dependency will turn into resentment. Shared resources and overlapping interests frequently become sources of dispute. This dynamic has been visible in many parts of the world where conflict has triggered mass migrations, whether among Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran, or the Rohingya communities in India and Bangladesh.

In tribal social norms along the Pak-Afghan border, demanding loyalty in exchange for hospitality is also viewed as a bargain, one that distorts the moral context of both loyalty and hospitality. When loyalty is demanded, it ceases to be an act of honour and becomes a transaction. In the Taliban's understanding, the TTP are their guests and brothers-in-arms who once fought alongside them against a common enemy. For Pakistan to now demand that they disarm, disband, or be handed over is perceived by the Taliban as a bargain that would stain their code of honour. To betray a guest or comrade under external pressure would violate the very moral fabric that sustains their tribal and ideological identity.

However, states operate via different norms. Their honour and codes are rooted in politics and interests of varying nature, from security and economy to grand strategy. When such interests outweigh the fear of stigma, states act pragmatically, and much of the emotionalism attached to a nation's image erodes. This is what Pakistan did with the Taliban leadership: it applied pressure from multiple directions, strikes, economic embargoes, diplomatic and political incentives, and, over time, helped craft a new domain of bargaining between the two actors.

What happened in Doha and Istanbul was a manifestation of that shift, although the sequence of events offers only a sliver of hope for a longer-term resolution of the dispute between the two sides.

One critical element in explaining why and how the Taliban turned hostile towards Pakistan lies in religious and ideological brotherhood. This argument has been unpacked in several ways, but a central factor is the dogma and ideological architecture that underpins the movement. Pakistan nurtured and supported mujahideen groups during the 1980s and 1990s, and later the Taliban, aiming to create prototypes of madressah graduates and even non-religiously educated cadres through public education channels who would think like Pakistanis and share its anti-Indian outlook. The project was strategic: to limit Indian influence in Afghanistan and to secure a friendly government on Pakistan's western flank.

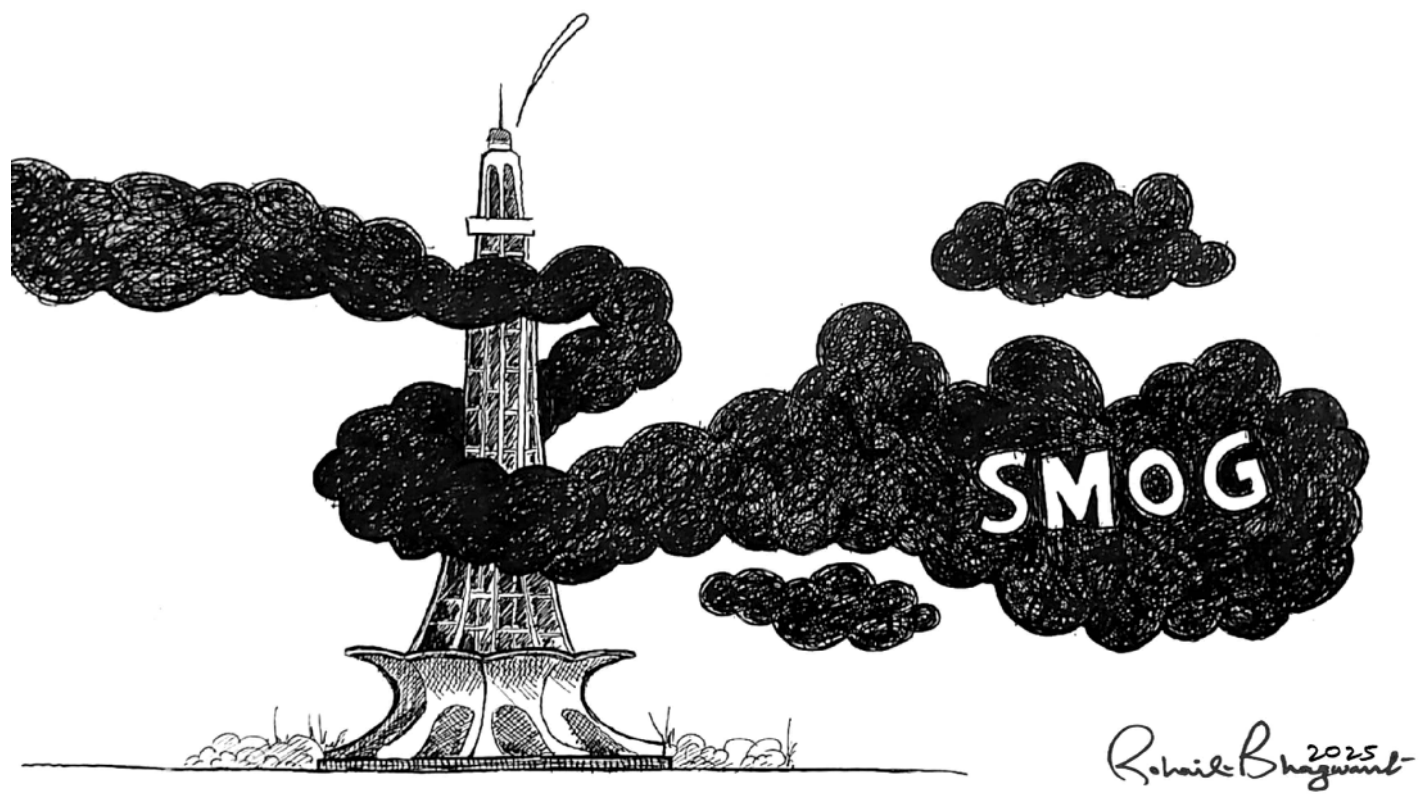
The project failed because the religious dogma embraced by the Taliban, many Pakistani madressahs, and religious elites presents a different vision of the state. They view Pakistan as a polity with weak ideological credentials that ought to be replaced by a 'proper' Islamic system. For that transformation, they regard political and armed struggle as necessary.

This is the argument many Taliban leaders continue to project to their audiences. The Pakistani militant groups, once engaged in Indian-held Kashmir, in Afghanistan, or used by the establishment for internal political purposes, held the same view. The jihadist literature of the 1990s was replete with the notion that once Kashmir and Afghanistan were 'liberated', the next turn would be Pakistan itself. Even Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami, one of the earliest militant groups, was involved in the failed 1995 military coup attempt aimed at toppling the government and establishing a theocratic state, one not unlike the regime the Taliban have since built in Afghanistan.

For the Taliban, who have absorbed much of Al Qaeda's political interpretation of Islamism, loyalty is defined through their religious worldview, their tribal and social code, and the political ethics these codes nurture. They interpret alliances and support during wartime as instruments of divine providence rather than acts of friendship. Assistance from states like Pakistan is thus viewed as part of God's plan, not a favour that demands reciprocity. The result is that Taliban-led Afghanistan has become even more hostile towards Pakistan than previous Afghan regimes, which at least operated within globally accepted diplomatic norms.

Within this worldview, any assumption among state elements here that the Taliban would remain loyal or act subservient now seems naive. Those who nurtured these groups in the hope of creating a strategic ally failed to grasp the ideological nature of their creation. In doing so, they not only empowered religious extremism beyond control but also harmed Pakistan's own social fabric, embedding sectarian hatred and militancy as enduring legacies of that miscalculation. ■

The writer is a security analyst.



BY ABBAS NASIR

Welcome musical interlude

WITH so much murder and mayhem in the world, so much turmoil and intolerance, a genocide (now paused) in the name of 'self-defence' and with twisted ideologies and terrorism taking so many lives of our people in the prime of their youth, with bigotry and narcissism defining many influential leaders around the globe, is it a surprise that each one of us seems forever to be tense and in a state of crisis?

Against the backdrop of this upheaval, I was seeking some temporary respite from the uncertain, often ugly and violent world, and surfing the net for content that could serve as a mild analgesic, even anaesthetic, and got lucky. And you'd be hard-pressed to realise how very lucky.

What I found on a video-streaming social media platform was a window to a Pakistan that was uplifting, life-affirming and reassuring. I don't watch much of our TV channels for the simple reason that it is largely a case of more of the same.

News and current-affairs programmes (NCA, as we media people call this genre) are anything but NCA. These are mostly designed to either serve as homage to the ego of the 'anchor' or are entertainment with politicians from across the political divide, socking it to each other.

These offer near-zero insights and are often as pleasant as a cockfight that leaves the poor birds bloody and debilitated. One learns nothing. And if watching two (or more) people talking over one another in a pointless, escalating shouting match does not do anything for you, as is the case with me, sitting in front of the idiot box becomes an exercise in futility.

But back to more pleasant things. So, on the video-streaming platform I found some clips from a talent hunt show called *Pakistan Idol*. Having lived through the Zia years as a young college and then university student and then as a journalist in the nascent years of my professional life, I was sure that the culturally barren society that the dictator sought to create would remain so.

Of course, the democratic interludes did resuscitate the 'cultural scene' somewhat, but it was left to another authoritarian leader, a proponent of 'enlightened moderation', to revive it in a bit more structured manner. Yes, one man's love for music made a difference because that is the upside of authoritarianism. It suddenly became kosher for high civil and military officials to be seen enjoying a musical evening and patronising art and artistes.

Once an interviewer, half mockingly, asked *Malakah-i-Mouseeqi* Roshan Ara Begum if those who showed up in large numbers to her live events understood the classical music that was her forte. The indomitable classical artiste par excellence smiled and said: "*Mere sunnay walay do qism ke hein. Ek woh jo raag jaantay aur samajhtay hein aur doosray woh jo kan rasiya hein. Mere liye donon qabile ehtaram hein.*" (Those who listen to me are of two kinds: first,those who understand classical music; and second, those whose 'ear' is discerning and can tell when they hear good music. I value both).

> One man's love for music made a difference because that is the upside of authoritarianism.

Although my soldier-father could sing classical music and could tell apart one *raag* from another with consummate ease, I count myself in the '*kan rasiya*' category. I wish I could have learnt the intricacies of each *raag* and its defining characteristics but remain grateful for a discerning 'ear'.

Having read criticism of some of the *Pakistan Idol* judges and their alleged lack of nous to be able to 'judge' others, it was easy to see in the worst of cases, they were '*kan rasiya*'. Almost all of them were able to tell what was good singing.

Some of the songs (*ghazal*, *geet*, *nazm*) chosen by the contestants took me to back to my childhood, as I grew up in a household where artistes, singers and musicians were held in high esteem and musical evenings were the norm. How else other than a privilege can you describe watching as a child in awe maestros of the calibre of Ustad Umrao Bundu Khan and Muneer Khatoon performing in our drawing room, emptied of all its furniture for a '*farshi nishist*'.

For Ms Khatoon, I recall my father telling me years later that he needed to get special permission from the GHQ to invite the 'Indian classical artiste' to our home whilst she was on a visit to Pakistan. I remember him telling me how what was possible in the first half of the 1960s would be impossible after the 1965 war — and perhaps even more so today.

In my formative years, whether it was a *ghazal* evening in an army mess, the Services Club or the Karachi Press Club, literally a one-minute walk from where we lived on Ingle Road in the mid-1960s up to 1966-67, I always accompanied my parents. Annu (Bhai) Uncle (*Dawn* journalist Anwer Husain), my father's university classmate, would always invite us.

I was thus able to listen to my heart's content Farida Khanum, Iqbal Bano and Mehdi Hasan among others. Much later, after my parents' passing, during the 1983 MRD movement, I watched a defiant Abida Parveen singing up a near-revolution at the KPC.

Because the *Pakistan Idol* had some of the contestants singing songs of so many of the *asataza* including Melody Queen Nur Jahan, it was but understandable that I was flooded with memories, nostalgia. The quality of the singing whether it was a *ghazal*, *thumri*, *nazm* or *geet* was so good. Pakistan is abundant in talent. It is bursting at the seams actually. Its flaws lie elsewhere.

Pakistan Idol performances triggered a desire to indulge in a listening session lasting long hours over several days, on headphones. I wonder what it was like for my wife who had to hear pretty loud cries out of nowhere of *'wahwahwah … kiya kehnay … bohot khoob*'. As for me, at least for now I feel rejuvenated and prepared to face the cruel world. ■

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